

Living up to his brand image...

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It was Shah Rukh Khan who once famously said: 'I work for brand SRK. I'm on his call 24/7.' Today, SRK's cool admission eerily rings true as the icon-worshipping world pretends to be shocked at what living up to his brand image did to Michael Jackson.



Barack Obama, Michael Jackson, M S Dhoni, Sachin Tendulkar and Kareena Kapoor

Jackson's final efforts to push himself beyond human endurance, just to live the brand, spelled his doom. Isn't it true of many celebs who in spite of physical injuries and psychological ailments, push themselves to the edge just to keep their 'brand' going? For Rakhi Sawant it's part of the job. 'Sometimes I want to be the simple, fun-loving girl that I am and not Rakhi Sawant' with make-up and loud ways. But that's a small price you pay for stardom.

Ever wondered what drives Sachin and Dhoni with a sprained ankle or SRK with a severe spinal injury to jump back to work without a pause? Maybe, in a highly-fickle commoditised world, it's necessary to be at the beck and call of the brand that becomes the man. Be it Barack Obama or Amitabh Bachchan, it's the image which makes the man or woman. Wouldn't Madonna be just another

aging star on the firmament without her outrageously daring, femme fatale branding? Closer home, would Rekha be as charismatic minus her halo of mystique?

Usually, the public does not relate to icons without imperfections. Michael Jackson was quirky, eccentric and mysterious. For all his wealth and professional excellence, he was perhaps understandably flawed, misguided and sad, and that's how the image and the man stayed. Every celebrity worth his salt, whether a partying liquor baron Vijay Mallya in business or fashion's wild child Rohit Bal, devotes his waking hours to 'live' that aura.

But living an image is like putting on a mask 24/7. And at times the cookie, like in the case of Jackson, crumbles with tragic consequences. From drugs to performance-enhancing steroids, from wild orgies to alcoholism, every few seconds headlines scream of a star buckling under pressure. Industry sources say that a top male star in Bollywood would pop pills to complete 48-hour work shifts without a wink. Rumours abound in the cricket circle how a few senior cricketers insist on playing in spite of ligament tears and sprained ankles to pocket lucrative brand endorsements. The grapevine has it that a top actress-turned-businesswoman snorts cocaine to get that adrenalin rush.

Such are industry standards set by Kareena Kapoor with her size zero image that 21-year-old model Sakshi, who never used to drink, needs a swig from the bottle every time I walk the ramp just to feel confident of my body. Says image guru Dilip Cherian, 'It starts out innocuously and goes to dangerous heights when the money and fame starts pouring in.' From innocent gym sessions to muscle-building steroids, from a fun nose job to getting plastic surgery done on every body part imaginable, stars at times become so obsessed with the image they create that they find it difficult to let go. As a result they succumb to stress, volatile behaviour or just end up making caricatures of themselves. Salman Khan famously lived up to his bad boy image by allegedly hitting Aishwarya Rai.

Britney Spears and Amy Winehouse regularly hit headlines for going berserk. Shoaib Akhtar shocked the world with his dependence on performance-enhancing steroids to remain a 'hero'. Recently, world swimming champion Michael Phelps, who was caught smoking marijuana, said, 'I engaged in behaviour which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment. Despite the successes I have had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way. For this, I am sorry.' Says Dr S Sudershan, psychologist, Rockland Hospital, 'Those who are insecure and narcissists, break under the pressure.'

But not all celebs end up as freak shows. Amitabh Bachchan reinvented himself with the passage of time. Observes image consultant Alyque Padamsee, 'Bachchan, SRK and David Beckham know the show must go on but at the same time realise where to draw the line between success and sanity.' Maybe, in the wake of Michael Jackson's death, it's time for celebs to pause and do a rethink.

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